



By AMITA KANEKAR

What is Indian culture? In a Marathi television soap-opera that I happened to be watching the other day, one Brahmin character talks to another about the importance of *sanskaar* (culture, or values); one of the examples offered of this *sanskaar* is having a *bai* (domestic worker) to wash your clothes, instead of a washing machine. It was a surprisingly accurate presentation of the Brahmanical understanding of culture—everybody in their traditional (i.e. caste-decided) and lowly-paid place.

I remembered this piece of Brahmanical wisdom in the recent uproar over the news that a gold medal for the best post-graduate student at Pune's premier University, the Savitribai Phule Pune University, was reserved for vegetarian and teetotal students who followed Indian *sanskriti* (culture) and *parampara* (tradition). Students practising yoga, meditation, and *pranayama* were to be given further preference. In the wake of student protests and widespread condemnation, the University announced that it had **suspended** the award.

Attempting to deflect the criticism, the University **clarified** that the medal had been instituted not by them, but by a family endowment. It was this family which had set the eligibility criteria, not the University. Also, this was nothing new. The medal had been instituted, with these same criteria, in 2006, and was being awarded every year since then.

The University's clarification is of course no clarification at all. Do they have no say over the gold medals handed out by them? Would they have accepted a gold medal instituted only for



alcohol-drinkers? Not very likely! The University clearly accepted these criteria because it did not find them objectionable.

It would be interesting to know, though, how the University has been determining the eligibility of candidates this past decade. Did it have a questionnaire? Did it cross-check the candidates' claims? Did it search their homes and fridges for meat or fish or alcohol, interview their family/friends, gate-crash their meals?

Or did it simply go by their background? If one is bahujan, dalit, or tribal, one must be eating meat and fish. If one is Muslim, ditto. If one is Catholic, of course, and alcohol as well. The medal thus goes to the Brahmin-Bania communities, by default. And, given the fact that these communities dominate these institutions, their monopolisation of the medals would hardly be noticed.

This University incorporated the name of pioneer educationist and Bahujan activist Savitribai Phule in its own name last year, but obviously just for cosmetics. And there is really nothing shocking that an Indian University should uphold Brahmin-Bania culture as Indian culture, and worthy of medals. This is the general belief in the Indian establishment, not just today but from before 1947. Vegetarianism, yoga, and cow protection were propagated by Brahmins as pillars of both Hinduism and patriotism right from the 19th century (Freitag 1980, Tejani 2008). To be a patriotic Indian came to mean practising Brahmanical Hinduism.

Since 1947, this conflation of Brahmanical Hinduism with nationalism has been

institutionalised. But many liberals refuse to see this. They condemn the BJP's Hindutva policies as communal and fascist, even though most of these policies were part of India from the word go, even if not as violently enforced as today. Indian secularism has always taken Brahmanical Hinduism as the default culture, with cow protection even in the Constitution, but—no doubt thanks to Dr Ambedkar—only as a directive principle. Laws against cow slaughter were passed by almost all Indian states, including Goa under the increasingly-Brahmanised Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party. Indian English invented the word '**non-veg**', a negative that implies that vegetarianism is the norm, even though the majority of Indians eat meat.

As Minu Ittype pointed out, reporting on the high infant mortality among the tribal population of Pallakad, Kerala (*'Leech Fields'*, Outlook, 29 July 2013), many bahun diets have worsened after 1947. The tribals of Pallakad have increasingly lost their traditional diets, as a direct result of the nature of Indian 'development'. Their diet used to be rich in a wide variety of meat, fish, and leafy vegetables, but with tribal lands taken over by non-tribals, the wildlife and forests destroyed, and the tribals themselves denied any of the benefits of development, they are forced to rely on the poor quality grains—and little or nothing else—provided by the public distribution system, leading to widespread malnourishment. Such are our Brahmanical food policies: beef for **export** as well as consumption in five-star hotels, bug-infested grain for the marginalised.

Along with vegetarian or near-vegetarian canteens. Even in a place like Goa, where a large section of the population eats beef and pork, and which has a number of justly famous beef and pork dishes, these are never served in Government canteens, nor in Government-backed food or cultural festivals, like IFFI.

In places like Hyderabad, Delhi, Bombay and elsewhere, students from marginalised communities are taking up this issues, launching fights for the right to traditional diets in canteens, and against discrimination in food. The film '[Caste on the Menu](#)' (made by the students of the School of Media and Cultural Studies, TISS, 2014), reflects on the hypocrisy regarding beef-eating in 'castemopolitan' Mumbai, where Brahmanism dominated public food spaces even before Maharashtra's 2015 ban on beef. As a north-eastern student says in the film, during a General Body Meeting of the TISS Students' Union on the demand that beef be served in the canteen after cooking facilities were withdrawn in hostels, 'Some people talk of cultural shock (about our food). Well, I was shocked to eat paneer, and I was shocked to eat roti!' Vegetarianism, says the film, is an upper caste tool for discrimination and for retaining upper caste dominance over marginalised sections, affecting livelihoods, social inclusion, and human rights.

Meanwhile, the announcement of the suspension of the Pune University medal was followed by the news from Rajasthan of another [lynching](#) of a Muslim man apparently for transporting cattle. 'Indian culture' is indeed alive and killing.

(First published in *O Herald*, dt: 16 November, 2017. This is an edited version.)



Share this:

- [Click to share on Twitter \(Opens in new window\)](#)
- [Click to share on Facebook \(Opens in new window\)](#)
- [Click to share on Google+ \(Opens in new window\)](#)